The Necessary Experience of Error

By Carla Billitteri

Delirium, Hybridity, Error

Carla Harryman's work has been found "intelligent, sardonic, and elliptical to the point of delirium," and to this list I would add *picaresque* and *joyful (*Ziolkowski n.p.). For "delirium" in its root meaning is "to go out of the furrow," an act of wandering, of digressing, of going astray and going wrong, and one can tell from the frequency with which Harryman uses the word "delight" (etymologically, "to lure away," to allure) that she takes joy in such delirium, in acts of writing that willingly depart from the furrows of the ordinary, the expected, the normative. Delirium manifests itself as continuous, restless movement, and it is only fitting that three of Harryman's most recent works (*The Words*, *Gardener of Stars*, and *Baby*) are picaresque tales of textual errancy suffused with the delight of moving across categorical boundaries, whether of gender, space, time, or human embodiment. These movements are affirmed or reinforced compositionally by Harryman's penchant for continuous migrations across boundaries of literary genres. Shifting swiftly and artfully from prose to poetry, from poetry to fable, from fable to drama, from drama to critical commentary, Harryman's works are hybrid texts in Bakhtin's sense, not fusions of genres in which new forms are created and in which old forms are changed beyond recognizability, but heterogeneous mixtures "belonging simultaneously to two or more systems" (Bakhtin 429). Through her particular approach to hybridity, Harryman demonstrates that her delight in the picaresque experience of textual errancy is not simply a crossing of genres, but of cognitive boundaries, for each literary genre defines and can in turn be defined as a

delineation of cognitive expectations. Harryman's genre crossing intentionally strays into the delirious experience of displacement and error. Her simultaneous holding together of heterogeneous genres is meant to create a sharp dissonance in cognition.

In a recent conversation, Harryman defined hybridity as "a necessary kind of experience," an observation I find irresistible in its compact affirmation of the more than merely formal value of her creative errancy. It is my contention here that Harryman's affirmation should be extended beyond genre to include a constellation of errant textual conditions (including misrecognition, disnarration, excription, and displacement) that together define her poetics of error as a necessary cognitive experience, one that takes error as a practice of utopian thinking. In other words, I see hybridity as a sub-set of a larger poetic project, one in which errancy is determining. In what follows, I wish to explore the political and epistemic scope of this project, as well as the manner of its narrative actualization. My essay is divided into two sections. The first and longer section gives an account of Harryman's exploration of error as misrecognition, excription, and disnarration, touching on the political dimensions of her project; the second discusses the epistemic practice of error, a practice that unfolds through acts of "association through dissociation."

I offer this schematic account of error in Harryman in the hope that it pertains to her work more generally (and I do make reference here to a variety of her writings dating back to the 1980s), but my principal inspiration has been *Gardener of Stars*. Like Harryman's other works, but even more so, *Gardener* is a multilinear narrative whose several story lines are so riddled with gaps and interruptions as to obstruct altogether the retrospective construal of a fabula (the chronological sequence of events structuring and thus guaranteeing a narrative's logical coherence; it is the sense we can make of a story told out of sequence). Harryman herself

describes *Gardener* as "an abstraction with innumerable focal points," a hydra-eyed abstraction imperiling any attempt to establish temporal or spatial coordinates, not to mention the emplotment of characters along such coordinates ("How I Wrote" 135). Let me just say, then, that Harryman's narrative relates in rocambolesque fashion the life and misadventures of the title character, Gardener, the often unwilling protagonist of the novel and, as we discover in its last pages, the only author (a perplexing discovery since the novel also has another author, Serena, whose work is ensconced in the center of the narrative). Other characters in the book include M, who is involved with Gardener in a symbiotic and intermittently erotic relationship; Caesar, Gardener's child; and Slave (also called "Infant"), Caesar's surrogate father. References to time and place are rare and fragmentary, but the actions of the novel occur in some unspecified post-atomic, post-industrial future, moving back and forth between a utopian community comprised primarily of women, and the City of Men, a bleak location strewn with war rubble where Gardener, arguably a female character, is accidentally exiled.[1] The novel ends with a spatial blurring that turns time back on itself. Caesar and Slave embark on a haphazard expedition, find Gardener, and bring her back to home base. Once these three characters are reunited with M, the landscape marking the utopian community of women merges into one indistinguishable continuum with the landscape of the City of Men and in this new space the narratives of Caesar, M, Slave, and Gardener come to a halt. Gardener, however, promises to narrate the story of their lives and of her exile, a story that she believes "will show what happens when an imagined world is that which is being made in fact" (178). We thus learn that the story Gardener will tell is the story that just concluded. Turning full circle in this way, *Gardener of Stars* becomes a self-contained, self-mirroring universe, "an imagined world … made in fact."

"Faulty Mapping": Misrecognition, Excription, Disnarration

The necessary experience of error deployed in *Gardener of Stars* marks a jump from the world we know, or think we know, to a place of utopian possibilities where familiar cognitive frames are both courted and eschewed. Harryman manifests this intention through the words (or thoughts) of Gardener, who muses: "Sometimes I want to leave the world of recognition" (82). This wish, as we come to realize, is the live ferment of a micro-revolution in scope and intention. In her critical interventions, Harryman has addressed the question of recognition as a problematic experience in light of the biased dynamics of gender regulating the construction of literary history. In her 1999 essay "Women's Writing: Hybrid Thoughts on Contingent Hierarchies and Reception," she points out that "the desire for recognition (for what one, for instance, has produced in the making) is the desire to be recognized precisely, to be named correctly, to have one's concerns represented properly." But Harryman also questions whether a proper recognition can "exist in the 'unfreedom' of society." Discussing this problem in relation to the reception of women writers, Harryman arrives at a negative conclusion. Recognition, she writes, "is impossible in a hierarchic model of canonicity which is constructed on the basis of hegemonic misrecognitions and in the preservation of categories that for instance draw relations between artists and saints." In an endnote, Harryman furthers her point with three examples "[r]egarding misrecognition on the local level in the context of contemporary women writers." All three examples involve male critics. The first critic characterizes Rae Armantrout's poetry as "anorexic," the second finds "metastasis" in Leslie Scalapino's work, the third applies "the concept of the Great Mother to … [Harryman's own] mixed-genre text, *Vice*." These "hegemonic misrecognitions" are predicated on conceptual errors: errors related to the social biases of the critics. There is no particular need to dwell on the nature of these errors. Describing

work produced by women as bodily anomalies (anorexia, metastasis), identifying a woman writer by an archetypical biological function ("Great Mother"), rediscovers a cultural assumption precisely by not recognizing the actual work or author.

Harryman's poetics is informed by countering such cultural assumptions. Moving errantly, she embraces misrecognition as a "situational generator" (to employ a narratological term): a generative principle of textual events, that is to say, of narratives. Misrecognition becomes for Harryman an opportunity for textual interventions that are politically aimed at denouncing the status quo. In *Gardener of Stars*, this intervention eventuates in the invention of "misrecognizable" characters, characters born under the sign of misrecognition, born to be misrecognized. These characters are placed aslant their own stories, for to be misrecognized is to be seen outside one's proper field and thus, by extension, to be "not in what is going on, but alongside it," as Gardener says of herself (92). When the misrecognition is especially grave, the characters are not simply alongside but *outside* their stories, as when Harryman says of M, "On some days M is a present absence" (105). Misrecognition here meets with *excription*, a narrative gesture that allows the narrator to introduce a character and at the same time expunge that character from the circumstances of its narration.[2] Interestingly, in this moment of excription, a trace of M's sweat remains, a trace topically associated with the autoerotic pleasure M feels when she willfully generates interpersonal situations of misrecognition, situations founded on M's practice of producing incorrect statements. "I say things incorrectly frequently," says M, "and feel the wrong impression I leave with anyone as voluptuously as I fe[el] the sweat surfacing on my thighs" (26).[3] Error delights M, in a sense that is entirely tangible, and she readily admits (see, e.g., 129) that she rejoices in Gardener's mistakes (although, as the reader comes to realize, those mistakes are in good part caused by M's own erroneous behavior).

As one of the two major characters in *Gardener of Stars*, M, the maker of errors, is eminently "misrecognizable" and hard to describe correctly: nothing about her is what it seems to be or what it could be taken to be; her gender and gender preferences are fluid; her age seldom mentioned or utterly meaningless; her features blurred and shifting, sometimes composed of animal and human aspects; her physical circumstances unclear; her thoughts, actions, and reactions unpredictable. A constant state of metamorphosis reigns around M; her narrative is often arranged as an evolving procession of surrealist tableaux. M stands out for the mysteriousness of her presence, a mysteriousness signaled by the contraction of her name to a single initial. This form of identification creates a particular pull of expectation in the reader; it is difficult, to paraphrase Harryman, to resist the desire to recognize M precisely by imagining what the "M" might stand for. The letter prompts us at first to think of mistakes, and M is, indeed, a thinker of mistakes, a character who embraces error as a voluptuous experience and literally falls into error as one would fall in love, with both curiosity and abandon. Thus, for instance, M willfully falls in a ditch, just to understand the experience of falling in a ditch (36). M is also a mythological figure whose shifting phenomenality of being (part bird, part animal, part woman, part child, part adolescent) is emblematic of the "nearly inchoate myth" of her post-atomic community (131). As a myth of inchoate being, M is a model of transformative behavior for Gardener and for almost everyone who comes in contact with her: she is a meaning-making character, a conduit of sense in a world that has lost both memory and sense. Gardener calls M a "mechanical genius, Mercury the mechanic" (20), and this aspect of her character is further signaled in the novel by M's favorite pastime of repairing old engines and "wayward machines" (105). Through M we understand that the mythological in Harryman, while still taken as a formal device of fable-making, is invested with historical implications. Reflecting on whether one

"could … make a life out of old things unmoored from their histories and prescribed meanings,"
M rejects such a possibility, saying that the idea of a life "unmoored" "turns me into a stranger to
myself. No, thank you" (125). M acknowledges the historical memory of the past as a grounding
condition of her present. Her erroneous behavior, when seen in this frame, is meant to transform
history, not to escape it. She thus seems to actualize the principal meaning of error in the
sciences, where, as Douglas Allchin puts it, "*An error is a faulty mapping that does not preserve
the structure of the world as intended*" (41).[4] Faulty mapping both undermines and transforms
the status quo; it is a force of change. In her function of mistake-maker, misrecognizable being,
myth of the inchoate, mechanical genius or meaning-maker, and, lastly, transformative agent of
historical memories, M is thus positioned, even more than Gardener, at the center of Harryman's
"textual machine" (to borrow Pierre Macherey's term), a machine that here produces, willingly
and precisely, a mapping that fails to preserve the familiar configuration of the world around us.

In my initial remarks, I noted a number of characteristic features of *Gardener of Stars*:
interruptions, gaps, divergent storylines, anachronic segments, erasure of spatial coordinates,
multilinear narrative. While these features may disorient a reader, they are not, in and of
themselves, productive of faulty mapping. Narratologically, the main textual strategy that
contributes to the creation of Harryman's faulty mapping can be grouped under the rubric of the
disnarrated. This term, put forward by Gerald Prince in 1987, marks "events that *did not* happen,
but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text"
(Prince 2). These events are purely mental constructs that do not directly contribute to the
development of a narrative.[5] A capacious category, the disnarrated includes "terms, phrases, and
passages that consider what did or did not or does not take place," and it can pertain to both "the
narrator and his or her narration" as well as "one of the characters and his or her actions" (Prince

3). Discursively, the disnarrated encompasses the following mental constructs: "expressions of impossibility or unrealized possibility, … expressions of observed prohibitions, epistemic expressions of ignorance, … expressions of nonexistence, purely imagined worlds, desired worlds, or intended worlds, unfulfilled expectations, unwarranted beliefs, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations, errors and lies" (Prince 3). In *Gardener of Stars*, at least half of Gardener's and M's narratives are constructed out of potentially erroneous opinions and judgments that do not correspond to fact, formulated as they were in dream states or while daydreaming. Moreover, both M and Gardener take turns in the disnarrating of events they have either witnessed or produced, as for instance when M declares that her description of Gardener's life "is written nowhere" (26), or when Gardener, having just narrated her dialogue with an old woman, observes that the old woman's words must be void of sense and that she is "not so sure she means those lines she must have gotten from somewhere" (54). The widening circle of successive disnarrations and hypothetical storytelling enfeebles and displaces narrative certainty as well as narrative pertinence—this latter a staple of narrative logic. Pertinence relies on the recognition of orderly and useful patterns of narrative events. A narrative is pertinent when it can answer in satisfactory and utilitarian terms the twin questions, "so what, what is this for" (Prince 4-5). When considered in these terms, disnarration is a delirium of storytelling that disintegrates the pertinence of narrative discourse and forces its readers to reassess their understanding of fiction-writing as an attenuated kind of logical discourse purposefully aimed toward a goal. The narrative in *Gardener* does not have a purpose; it does not move toward a goal.

Narrative pertinence is a narratological feature Harryman has targeted and attacked since her 1982 manifesto "Toy Boats," where she declared in the opening line, "I prefer to distribute

narrative rather than to deny it" (*There Never Was a Rose* 2). As the text that follows makes clear, this distribution would only happen under the sign of a total deregulation and destabilization of narrative norms; it would, in other words, be a distribution pursued in open defiance of pertinence.[6] Instead of arranging her fictions to create "assurance" and a sense of positive "knowledge" (two pillars of narrative pertinence in Prince's account), in the last twenty years Harryman has consciously tried to "suspend interpretive coherence" ("Acker Un-formed" 36), thus leaving her readers in a state of doubt and uncertainty. Displacing if not actively undermining expectations of pertinence is a practice that reflects Harryman's desire to affirm a condition of anarchic and purposeless *im*pertinence—what Harryman defines as "an ambivalent utopia in which the writer … enter[s] the writing without even knowing 'clearly what [she] is hoping for'" ("A Few Comments on Utopia and Apocalypse" 11). This condition, actualized in *Gardener* through disnarration and other techniques that erode certainty and pertinence, is meant to create an active change in the reader. As Harryman insists in her commentary on *Gardener*, the reader is invited to embrace a kind of "non-rational logic" ("How I Wrote" 135) and to partake in a space of psychic freedom that Harryman has elsewhere described as a state of continuous and non-linear becoming in which the reader's "self-identity … multiplies, expands, pixelates, contracts, is undone" ("Acker Un-formed" 36).

It should come as no surprise that the most important impact of Harryman's turn away from narrative pertinence can be observed at the level of character or subject. As already noted, in Harryman's writings there are no characters in the traditional sense, only "unformed subject[s]," "anarchic functions that do not take root as fictional subjects but … instead possess unreliable properties that crowd the space of the novel" ("Acker Un-Formed 37, 36). These characters do not "lack character/subjectivity—rather … [they] are in an altogether different

circumstance: one in which subjectivity, the illusory landmark of character, is not a concern"
("Acker Un-Formed 36). This unformed subjectivity, or "*a-subjectivity*" (a term Harryman
borrows from Denis Hollier), is an ephemeral "product of the space of the writing," passing so
quickly and so strangely as to "'not allow for the time to become a subject'" ("Acker Un-
Formed" 36). The subject, or what is left of such a discourse formation, has been excripted,
presented through its absence or presented as that which will remain absent or non-represented.
If and when the character emerges, it does so as an inchoate being, a blurred "amalgam of
inference" (*Animal Instincts* 81).

The radical rethinking of subjectivity Harryman orchestrates in *Gardener of Stars*
through her folding of disnarration, erasure of narrative pertinence, excription of character, and
repeated misrecognition is further enhanced by the erasure of psychological explanations about
the characters' actions. While Harryman seldom provides positive clues about the story or about
her characters, negative clues abound. In an interlude of the novel, Harryman observes that
"[t]here is something hopelessly delightful about saying what something is not" (38, 119), and
the gist of her characters is, as M specifies, to *act the part that they are not*. Saying what is "not"
and acting the part one is "not" are essential components for Harryman of "an unstoppable
dynamic between collective refusals and positive actions," a dynamic that "finally destroys all
static designs" (*Gardener of Stars* 119). Misrecognition is predicated then on a strategy of
refusal. The political objectives of this refusal are described in "Meghom," a mid-nineties text
centered on what Harryman calls "the game of minute resistance":

> This is a game of minute resistance. Do not try to imagine how small but just keep minute
> resistance in mind. Doing so will appropriately limit your actions and you will be a viable
> player. You can play with others or by yourself. There is usually a motive for playing. A

no symbolically related to a quantum no, a grand enfoldment of no. This small no … is

what you are playing with. It is the scale of meghom, and it has a life of its own. … Many

of us are playing this game inside the Utopian Borders. … When playing, it is important

to remember the words: **the scale of minute resistance**. … The intention of the game is

to invisibly shift history without the sources of the shift being identified and without the

shift being understood as history. It will not be seen through an historical record or

theory, but it nevertheless affects the outcome of the record or the theory without the

recorders or theorizers knowing. (*There Never Was a Rose* 98-99)

Refusal, in the game of minute resistance, intentionally produces misrecognition, for in it we see

what the other is not. This planned misrecognition is in equal measure subtle ("invisible,"

Harryman says) and unstoppable, aimed at actualizing a historical shift, aimed, that is, at an

ideological reversal of social biases.

Moving along these lines of reversal, playing the game of minute resistance from within

the utopian context of the novel, the excripted presence of otherwise misrecognizable characters

in *Gardener of Stars* is an example of what Harryman theorized earlier in her oeuvre as

heterogeneity and *psychological autonomy*, two political and experiential conditions that she

envisioned as the liberation of the "human form … from a trellis of human forms" (*There Never*

Was a Rose 34). Thus, in her 1987 piece, "Autonomy Speech," Harryman presented her vision of

a finely excripted character, somebody who exists in order to prove that "*no objects, spaces, or*

boundaries are sacred in themselves":

Picture someone in an entirely autonomous space. This is the basis for understanding

heterogeneity released without a form. … When I close my eyes I think of psychological

autonomy: there is someone in the room who makes all her own distinctions, who does

not use others' covert instructions as a basis for response: this is character: the human

form liberated from a trellis of human forms but still surrounded by bathtub, plates, and a

bowl of artichokes. (*There Never Was a Rose* 33-34)

The bathtub, the plates and the bowl of artichokes are overly familiar compositional elements in

a domestic interior scene arranged around a figure we are first invited to recognize as familiar

("someone"), although our recognition is swiftly exposed as a misrecognition (for this

"someone" is someone "liberated from a trellis of human forms"). I take this figure of "the

character" to be the allegory of Harryman's political vision guiding her poetics of error as

excription and misrecognition. In my reading, the "trellis of human forms" is the recognizable

framework of social identities. This recognizable framework enforces a significant lack of

autonomy; it is oppressively familiar, and homogenizing. The liberation from this trellis gives

birth to "character," a persona who is no longer a recognizable subject—indeed, no longer a

subject per se.

Gardener of Stars, with its array of heterogeneous characters, takes particular delight in

undermining the trellis of human forms, and in two instances—the blurring of object and subject

(at 106) and the blurring of Gardener and M (at 31)—it radically challenges the very ideas of

"human" and "form." In both of these instances, Harryman's practice of error becomes delirium,

a complete dissolution of boundaries, that is, a loss of subjectivity demanding radical cognitive

change. This change is what I will discuss in the second and last part of my essay as the

epistemic practice of error, a practice of association through disassociation.

Disassociation through Association: The Utopian Project of Errancy

In *Gardener of Stars*, the character M experiences the production of error as a source of immediate, sensual pleasure, so it is not surprising that this particular character would be the one who imagines a society where error is the dominant mode of cognitive awareness of the real. M pictures this utopian society as an "improbable theatre" whose distinctive features include infeasible settings or stage directions, telegraphic descriptions of unrepresentable actions, and odd props (props that can only be seen as linguistic artifacts). The list is quite extensive, and I will cite only a few representative examples here:

> A furnace without gloves. … A body without a head. A head without greed. A birth without blood. Dirt without fallacies. Hands without nettles. The Law of the Missing Middle. Hardship without bevels. … Fruit without beets. Beets without fingers. Hands without people. … Sanity without heaven. Inconsequence without cruelty. … Manners without tears. … Traffic without gates. … Metal without making. (49-50)

An errant logic of word association governs this list. These associations are sensually, not semantically, justified; they form part of M's voluptuous pleasure in proffering erroneous statements. When read in its entirety, this list has the enchanting rhythm of a spell. M's pleasure is all-enfolding and generative, for her list crowds the mind with objects, giving a sense of the "complex interrelationships" of all things, an enhanced cognition of a reality that, as M argues, ordinarily lies "beyond our understanding" (29). Through semantic errancy, the disassociation of logical categories bolsters the association of linguistic ones. The cognitive experience of error produced by M's "improbable theatre" is thus both sensual and constructive, "infeasible" and deconstructive, the textual correlate of Franco Borsi's definition of utopian architecture that Harryman places as the epigraph to *Gardener*: "[A] utopian project is an infeasible project. It

may be so by default or by choice … or by failure to evaluate certain aspects or structural risks. … The terms 'fanciful,' 'fantastic,' and 'imaginary' thereby become positive synonyms" (*Gardener of Stars* n.p., quoting *Architecture and Utopia*). Borsi's paradox of infeasibility by choice—the choice of failure, it should be noted—proposes a reading of utopia as a dynamic interplay of affirmation (association) and rejection (disassociation) that ultimately broadens the horizon of our cognition. Although the interplay is characterized by failure, this failure is, if we recall Allchin, the product of a faulty mapping, a systemic error that pulls us away from the familiar and produces a transformation of expectations. In a similar fashion, the occurrence of mistakes in M's "improbable theatre" (and, indeed, any occurrence of mistakes in *Gardener of Stars*) counters our familiar cognition of the real as a discrete universe of objects organized in well-defined and distinct logical and semantic categories, and opens us to the un-familiar (and frequently fanciful) cognition of the real as a universe of indiscrete (that is, continuous) data flow where linguistic objects are taken up strictly as they occur, without a sense of inherent order or final design.

When looked at more closely, M's list of infeasible props and stage directions consists of a series of linguistic constructs in which something has been erased of taken away; they are, in other words, correlative in object form to Harryman's excripted characters. In several instances, however, what has been taken away is incongruously related to the overall semantic context of the linguistic construct, as for instance in "A furnace without gloves," "Dirt without fallacies," "Hands without nettles," or "Manners without tears." Misrecognition here meets with excription, expanding the fantastic qualities of M's improbable theatre. The analysis of the epistemic practice generating these misrecognizable objects can best be approached by way of the classic Saussurean distinction between the syntagmatic, or horizontal, versus the paradigmatic, or

vertical, axes of language.[7] The former axis concerns the linear associations of phonemes

(sounds) and the relation of words as they are "arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking"

(Saussure 123); the latter concerns the semantic relations of words and the range of permutations

these relations allow. For instance, in the sentence "The cat sleeps," a paradigmatic permutation

would affect the word "cat" or the verb "sleeps," so that the language user could change the

sentence into, for instance, "The child sleeps," or "The cat eats." The first permutation affects the

semantic sphere of the word "cat," allowing for a change within the range of subjects who can

sleep; in this respect, it would be erroneous to say, "The lamp sleeps." The second permutation

affects the semantic sphere of possible actions a cat can perform; in this respect, it would be

illogical to say "The cat flies." A sentence like "A furnace without gloves" presents us with a

syntagmatic ordering of "x-without-y," where "x" and "y" are both common nouns. This

ordering, while syntagmatically acceptable, is logically erroneous, because the semantic sphere

opened by the string "furnace-without …" would logically require the noun "filter," not

"gloves." When we read "A furnace without gloves" we are thus able to recognize, at the

syntagmatic level, something that we cannot recognize at the paradigmatic level. By the time we

become aware of this misrecognition, we are taken up in M's linguistic errancy and we

experience the drift of her language, its going astray, moving toward the infeasible dimensions of

utopian thought. This drift is entertaining if not reasonable. This is what M's improbable theatre

demonstrates: that whenever language "fails," it both disassociates itself from reason and

associates itself with pleasure.[8]

Another character in the novel, Caesar, the precocious child of Gardener, shares M's

delight in a life of linguistic errancy with a slightly more comedic or fanciful taste. Here is a

description of Caesar's exchanges with Slave (his surrogate father during the time that Gardener is exiled in the City of Men):

> The slave was never called slave or treated like a slave. … sometimes people called him handsome, … but Caesar mistook Handsome for Answer just as young people used to mistake Rye for Ride or visa versa in the old Beatle's song. Answer would say, a branch from a tree. Caesar would say, a ranch house. … Answer would say, today we're going to dig a well. And Caesar would say, we're going to dig well. Answer would say, you little comedian. And Caesar would say, you are my straight man. Answer would say, give me Barabas and Caesar would say, give me babies. (156)

Again, an errant logic that associates by disassociation is at work here, and this time the error is played both on the syntagmatic axis (as in the phonetic deformations behind the exchange of "Handsome for Answer," "dig a well" for "dig well") and on the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis (as in the permutation and phonetic distortion of "Barabas" for "babies"). In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure tersely remarks that "speaking is characterized by freedom of combinations; one must therefore ask whether all syntagms are equally free" (124). There is, in fact, very little freedom both at the syntagmatic and at the paradigmatic levels, as the range of language combinations and permutations is limited by the social need of being intelligible to other speakers or language users.[9] Indeed, a simple phonetic slip ("pig/fig," for instance, an example discussed by Jakobson in "Two Aspects" at 97-98) immediately alters the sense of the phrase, producing a breakdown of communication. Similarly, the erroneous permutation of words in the semantic axis precipitates language into illegibility. These slips into error, these voluntary and even gleeful leaps into the errancy of linguistic freedom, characterize Caesar's language practice. In the utopian society of the novel, however, errancy does not jeopardize

communication. Caesar's humorous catalogue of misrecognitions and mistakes is in fact part of his bonding with Slave and his community. Through Caesar, then, even more than through M (who is, by definition, a less gregarious character), the cognitive experience of error becomes the very substance of social relations.

Caesar and M put into practice Gardener's desire to turn away from the "world of recognition," a world composed of objects organized (that is, socialized) in well-defined logical categories. Their mistakes point toward a model of dis/associationist epistemics where cognition is primarily shaped by the pleasure of errant logic and errant perceptions. I take this epistemic stance to be the engine of Harryman's poetics. As Harryman puts it in "Toy Boats," her writing is "pulled" by the "chaos" of unprocessed sensorial data, data that are taken up as they appear prior to their categorization in logical structures of thought. She writes, "[T]he thing pulling the writing toward it is chaos: the words fall in place in anticipation of a jumble" (*There Never Was a Rose* 5). In *Gardener*, mostly by way of M and Caesar, Harryman de facto brings her readers into a linguistic universe where "words fall in place" with the very precisely willed "anticipation of a jumble"—the jumble of ordinary logic. Harryman's associationism manifests itself through the disassociative gestures of excription and misrecognition. It "borrow[s] from the things of this world in their partiality" ("Toy Boats" 6) and seeks to achieve "[t]he erasure of distinction rather than the integrity of objects" (*Gardener* 106). At its most extreme, her associationism seeks a "release [of] description from objects … so that resemblance to order … [is] denied" (*There Never Was a Rose* 52-53). Excription and misrecognition invite partiality of meaning, not completeness; this partiality in turn creates the possibility for an inter-related plurality of meanings that counters any familiar "resemblance to order." The unfamiliar order that is sought is then the utopian order.

In a more comprehensive look at her practice, Harryman describes her approach to writing as part of her thinking about relations. She calls this thinking "imprecise," but this imprecision is the intended result of her dis/associationist epistemics:

> Generating material pertains to my treatment of it. … I do not write with inner truth. Writing is a demonstration of the influence of relationships. …This thinking is imprecise and is dependent on the nature of the work. … The discrete forms (the fragments, pieces of partially invented genres) of those things I write refer to their own various points of origin. A point of origin may be where many of the same kinds of fragments exist simultaneously. … In order to become part of the work, the discrete parts must yield their autonomous identity. (*Vice* 54)

The result of this compositional method emerges in *Gardener of Stars*. Gardener dreams of herself as a child, "hold[ing] onto the tiniest thread connecting her to the land of premises … where she would roam" (98). Roaming in "the land of premises," *Gardener* enacts Harryman's interest in showing the relations among the "various points of origins" of the "discrete forms (fragments, pieces of partially invented genres)" comprising her prose.[10] The phenomenology of these relations—a combination of association (whereby similar "fragments exist simultaneously") and disassociation (whereby each "discrete part" is made to "yield" its "autonomous identity")—provides further evidence of the epistemic stance sustaining Harryman's poetics of error. Each "discrete part" here is treated as a "character," in the sense Harryman delineated in "Autonomous Speech": its autonomy is excripted and made misrecognizable in the relational context of the composition. In this writing, no meaning is correct (i.e., fully recognizable), singular, or finite. The "imprecision" of thinking generated by the relational plurality of this approach to writing is thus something Harryman wants to make us

experience. "Lack of singular knowledge," she writes in *Words*, "promotes delicious fantasies" (13), and not surprisingly these are fantasies of errancy, of erroneous behavior. Error has therefore strong positive connotations in Harryman's work, for it provides us with the necessary experience of a plural interrelation while instituting a mode of knowledge that would realize Caesar's goal in *Gardener of Stars* of "finally destroy[ing] all static designs." This destruction is not material but ideological; as Harryman's poetics of excription, disnarration, and misrecognition demonstrate, it is a dis/associationism that inaugurates a transformative cognitive experience. When manifested textually, this cognitive experience realizes what is logically unrealizable, a paradox that goes by the name of Utopia. As Gardener says, with regard to M, the maker of errors, "Even though what she reads of my thoughts is inaccurate, the activity of her discernment produces something more exciting, even more opportunistically promising, than veracity" (*Gardener of Stars* 23). This "something" is the necessary experience of error.

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Notes

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[1] As I shall mention in what follows, despite the fact that the narrative moves between the utopian community of women and the City of Men, the gender of Gardener, as well as the gender of every other character in *Gardener of Stars*, is never entirely what it seems, for it is generally perceived as a fluid and inherently unstable state of being.

[2] I borrow this term from Jean-Luc Nancy's discussion of Bataille in *The Birth to Presence* (at 319-40), where it is used to mark the juncture of legibility and illegibility. It should be noted that Harryman's excription also functions as metafictional exposure in this particular passage of *Gardener of Stars*, for Harryman is calling our attention to the primary code of narrativity, that of making present what is absent.

[3] The eroticism permeating M's errant behavior calls to mind, in a mode of open subversion, the "attribution of a moral grade to error" prominent in Western culture (see, e.g., Conley at 8).

[4] Allchin writes that in light of this "faulty mapping," "one may view error as any element generating 'incoherent' practice" (43 n4). This practice of incoherence well suits Harryman's non-normative and utopian imagination of social behavior based on misrecognition and related terms in the constellation of error.

[5] As Prince acknowledges, his theory of the disnarrated is but the expanded version of Marie-Laure Ryan's narratological category of "virtual embedded narrative," a category first introduced by Ryan in her 1986 article "Embedded Narratives and Tellability." Ryan's "virtual embedded narrative," Prince explains, is a "mental construct," "any story-like representation produced *in the mind of a character*" (Prince 3).

[6] Rae Armantrout shared Harryman's preoccupation with narrative pertinence. In her contribution to the 1985 *Non/Narrative* issue of *Poetics Journal*, Armantrout directly addressed the twin questions, "[W]hat is a pertinent event[?] How do we recognize it?" (93).

[7] Although Saussure was the first to advance the distinction between the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes of language, the term "paradigmatic" was introduced by Roman Jakobson in two related articles: "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956) and "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" (1960).

[8] On the significance of drift in Harryman's poetics and compositional practice, see her recent essay, "Drift à Deux." Drift, or, more appropriately, drifting, is the English rendition of *la dérive*, a Situationist coinage first defined by Guy Debord as "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances" (cit. in Harryman, "Drift à Deux" at 10). This "technique" (a conceptual gesture, by all accounts) well describes the instrumental role of hybridity as a sub-set of errancy in Harryman's poetics.

[9] It should be noted in this regard that Saussure identified the paradigmatic as the axis of "associative relations," but by this he meant the "mental associations" revealing "the nature of the relations that bind … terms together" (125). These associations are not arbitrary, he specified, for "[t]he mind *naturally* discards associations that becloud the intelligibility of discourse" (126n10, italics mine).

[10] It is only appropriate that Gardener's dream is a fragment of a story belonging to another author whose identity remains unknown. The story quite abruptly finds its way into a section of the narrative, and is "boxed off" by a thin pencil line on the page.